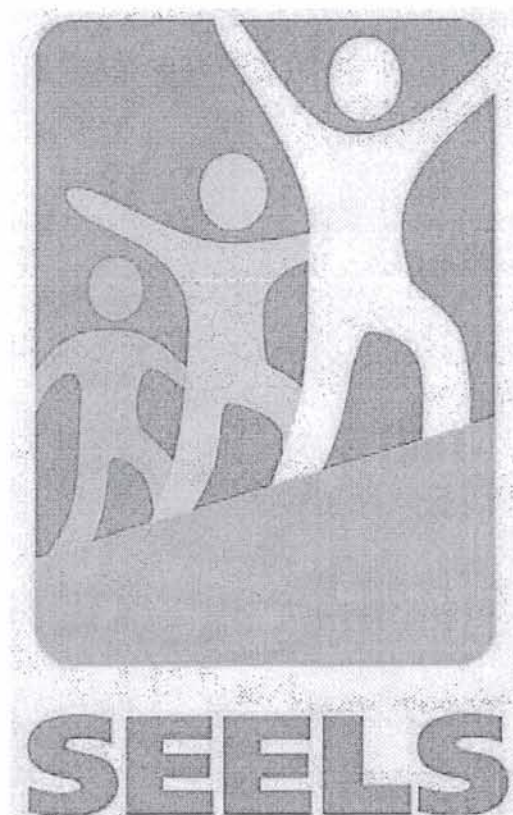


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## THE CHILDREN WE SERVE: THE DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF ELEMENTARY AND MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES AND THEIR HOUSEHOLDS

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## CONTENTS

<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	v
<b>1. Introduction, by Mary Wagner and Jose Blackorby</b> .....	1
An Overview of SEELS .....	2
Focus of This Report .....	5
Organization of This Report .....	6
<b>2. Demographic Characteristics of Elementary and Middle School Students     Receiving Special Education, by Camille Marder and Mary Wagner</b> .....	7
Students' Primary Disabilities .....	7
Age and Grade Level .....	8
Gender .....	10
Racial/Ethnic Background .....	12
Language Spoken at Home .....	14
<b>3. Characteristics of Students' Households, by Mary Wagner, Camille Marder,     and Denise Cardoso</b> .....	17
Household Composition .....	17
Living Arrangements .....	17
Marital Status .....	18
Household Size .....	19
Prevalence of Disabilities .....	19
Disability Differences in Household Composition .....	19
Demographic Differences in Household Composition .....	21
Parents' Characteristics .....	22
Parents' Age .....	22
Parents' Education .....	23
Parents' Employment .....	24
Disability Differences in Parents' Characteristics .....	25
Demographic Differences in Parents' Characteristics .....	25
Economic Status .....	28
Household Income .....	28
Experience with Benefit Programs .....	29
Current Benefit Program Participation .....	30
Changes Over Time in TANF and SSI Participation .....	30
Children's Health Insurance Coverage .....	31
Availability of Adequate Transportation and Telephone Service .....	33
Relationship among Economic Status Indicators .....	34
Disability Differences in Economic Status .....	35
Demographic Differences in Economic Status .....	37

<b>4. The Children We Serve, by Mary Wagner and Jose Blackorby .....</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>References .....</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>Appendix. SEELS Sampling, Data Collection, and Analysis Procedures:</b>	
<b>Wave 1 Parent Interview/Survey .....</b>	<b>51</b>
SEELS Sample Overview .....	51
The SEELS LEA Sample .....	51
Defining the Universe of LEAs .....	51
Stratification .....	52
LEA Sample Size .....	53
The SEELS Student Sample .....	53
Parent Interview/Survey .....	54
Weighting the Wave 1 Parent Data .....	55
Sample Weighting .....	56
Bias .....	57
Estimating Standard Errors .....	57
Calculating Significance Levels .....	58
Measurement Issues .....	59



## EXHIBITS

1-1	SEELS Conceptual Framework .....	3
2-1	Disability Category Distribution of Children Receiving Special Education, Ages 6 to 13 .....	8
2-2	Students' Age and Grade Level .....	9
2-3	Students' Age and Grade Level, by Disability Category .....	10
2-4	Student Gender, by Disability Category .....	11
2-5	Racial/Ethnic Backgrounds of Students with Disabilities and Students in the General Population .....	13
2-6	Students' Racial/Ethnic Backgrounds, by Disability Category .....	14
2-7	Language Most Often Spoken at Home, by Students' Race/Ethnicity .....	15
2-8	Primary Language Spoken at Home, by Disability Category .....	16
3-1	Living Arrangements of Students with Disabilities and Students in the General Population .....	18
3-2	Size of Households of Students with Disabilities and Students in the General Population .....	19
3-3	Household Composition, by Disability Category .....	20
3-4	Household Composition, by Students' Race/Ethnicity .....	22
3-5	Mother's Age at Child's Birth for Students with Disabilities and Students in the General Population .....	23
3-6	Education of Parents of Students with Disabilities and Students in the General Population .....	24
3-7	Employment of Parents of Students with Disabilities and Students in the General Population .....	250
3-8	Parents' Characteristics, by Disability Category .....	26
3-9	Parents' Characteristics, by Race/Ethnicity .....	27
3-10	Household Income of Students with Disabilities and Students in the General Population .....	29
3-11	Benefit Program Participation of Households of Students with Disabilities and Those in the General Population .....	31
3-12	Health Insurance Coverage of Students with Disabilities .....	32
3-13	Managed Care among Children with Disabilities .....	32
3-14	Parents' Reports of Problems with Health Insurance .....	33
3-15	Benefit Program Participation and Household Resources, by Household Income	34
3-16	Household Economic Status, by Disability Category .....	36
3-17	Problems with Health Insurance, by Disability Category .....	37
3-18	Household Economic Status, by Race/Ethnicity .....	37
3-19	Household Composition and Parent Characteristics, by Household Income .....	39
3-20	Racial/Ethnic Distribution of Students with Disabilities and Students in the General Population, by Income Level .....	41

3-21	Racial/Ethnic Distribution by Income Level and Disability Category .....	42
A-1	Response Rates for Parent/Guardian Telephone Interview and Mail Survey .....	55
A-2	Example of Weighted Percentage Calculation .....	56



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## 1. INTRODUCTION

By Mary Wagner and Jose Blackorby

*"In America, no child should be left behind. Every child should be educated to his or her full potential."*

President George W. Bush (2001)

These words articulate the strong commitment of this country to the education of all its children. Although "no child left behind" only recently has become the phrase that encapsulates our national commitment and education agenda, the spirit behind it has been the foundation of federal special education legislation and policy for more than 25 years. Since 1975, when P.L. 94-142, the Education of All Handicapped Children Act (EHA), was passed, federal legislation and policy have been pivotal in moving children and youth with disabilities into the mainstream of public education so that they are better able to achieve their full potential, the ultimate goal of our education system.

In the years since P.L. 94-142, federal special education legislation has reflected demographic, social, economic, and political changes in our country, as well as lessons learned from serving an increasingly diverse student population. By 1997, EHA had evolved into the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and that year it underwent another significant reshaping in the process of congressional reauthorization. The ensuing IDEA '97 (P.L. 105-17) was an effort to build on the "significant progress" under earlier legislation by:

- "Raising expectations for children with disabilities
- Increasing parental involvement in the education of their children
- Ensuring access to the general education curriculum
- Ensuring that regular education teachers are involved in planning and assessing children's progress
- Including children with disabilities in assessments, performance goals, and reports to the public
- Supporting quality professional development for all personnel who are involved in educating children with disabilities" (U.S. Department of Education, 1997).

IDEA '97 also recognized the importance of having solid information on the experiences and achievements of students with disabilities as a foundation for improving practice and accountability within schools. The legislation authorized the "production of new knowledge" [Sec. 673(b)(1)] through a variety of federal activities, including "producing information on the long-term impact of early intervention and education on results for individuals with disabilities through large-scale longitudinal studies" [Sec. 673(b)(2)(H)].

In carrying out the responsibility for producing new information on long-term impacts of education for students with disabilities, the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) of the U.S. Department of Education is implementing a portfolio of longitudinal studies that span the age range of children and youth with disabilities. The Special Education Elementary



(NHES) are more precise because an analysis file was created from the publicly available data to match the age of SEELS students.